

The Gift of Nature

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It's Groundhog Day today! I'm sure most of you have seen the movie Groundhog Day with Bill Murray and Andy MacDowell. I was surprised to discover that I had never seen the movie. I knew of it, but I didn't know the story at all. So, I watched it last night. What a change in perspective, a change of heart Phill made in this story. He began to expand his attention and his awareness as well.

Today, as we face challenges to remember our spiritual connection, I want to remind you that we have a way to easily find some peace in our lives. We can take in the gift of Nature. It isn't separate from us, and even though we may feel separate from it at times, we aren't. We are part of Nature.

We are classified as mammals in the animal kingdom. It's easy to forget that, but it's true. Yesterday, I went for a walk around the community in which I live. It borders the Dungeness River. When I decided what I wanted to talk about today, I had a hunch we would benefit from some calming nature energy right now. I know that I benefit from finding some calming energy! I finished the papers for the degree I've been working on for the past three years, and now I am finishing the last two classes of the ministerial certificate. Graduation is June 7th. It is keeping me busy and adds a bit of stress along the way. I'm working on a class on church finance right now. So, the gift of nature is as important to me as anyone.

Spending time in nature helps us connect more deeply with ourselves and foster empathy, compassion, and gratitude toward others. Studies have supported the good of being outside, but we all know it without being told.

We talk about self-care, but when things are getting stressful, it seems more challenging to pay attention to what would help the most. That's when eating the wrong

things, not getting outside because “I don’t have time,” and getting caught in distracting behaviors like playing solitaire on my device or turning on YouTube and watching things that run one after another.

It’s just not helpful. Then there is the guilt and worry afterward because I haven’t gotten things done!! You know what I mean, don’t you? Tell me I’m not the only one this happens to.

The Gifts of Nature bring me back to some balance. Trees are a great place to connect and find balance. I listened to Raven Dana begin her Listening to the Trees class. She shared a quote from the book *The Songs of Trees* by biologist David George Haskell. Hi writes,

“The living memories of trees, which manifests in their songs, tell the story of their communities. We human beings belong within that conversation for we are their kin. To listen to the trees is to hear our own voices and to hear the voices of our larger family. We are all, all of us, humans, trees, insects, birds, pluralities, we are not singular entities but networks of lives. All of life exists within this embodied network. Our ethic, therefore, must be one of belonging. To listen to trees, nature’s greatest connectors, is one way to learn how to inhabit the relationships that give life its source, its substance, and its beauty.”

Dana shared that the trees have a system through their roots that works as a nervous system for them. Now, there is a much better understanding of how trees are connected to each other. They can communicate and interact with each other.

I learned that we can actually respectfully communicate with the trees. They, like every living thing, have a spirit, and we can take time to listen. Years ago, someone told me that the Native Americans say, “The trees tell the truth.” She said you can offer the tree a gift of corn meal or tobacco, then lean your back against the tree and ask it a question. I was curious and open to the idea. So, I tried it.

I had planned to go somewhere away from home in a less conspicuous place to find a tree to talk with, but my car wasn’t working at the time. Two large pine trees were between my house and the neighbors, so I decided to work with one of those trees. I offered some cornmeal and leaned against the tree. I closed my eyes and asked an open-ended question: “What do you have to share with me?”

The next thing I knew, I was watching a scene in my mind. I wouldn't have gone to it on my own, but here it was, playing. I didn't really understand the relevance of the answer, but I received it just the same.

Nature is a life-sustaining resource for us and all life. We breathe in the oxygen and breathe out the carbon dioxide. The trees breathe just like we do, but while humans inhale oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide, trees do the opposite. Liz Forster shared the good the trees offer us on the National Forest Foundation website. The tree's leaves pull in carbon dioxide, water, and energy from the sun. The process is called photosynthesis, and it turns sunlight into sugar for the trees.

In the process, they emit oxygen for us to breathe and lots of other animals. This process slows the effect of climate change. The trees are pretty amazing. House plants also give off oxygen in our homes while they help clean the air.

Nature offers a Healing Power for physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. "Energy Givers and Energy Takers" - A friend shared a list of "Energy Givers" and "Energy Takers" with me. The "Energy Givers" list includes Nature, sunlight, hydration, breathing, fresh air, movement, meditation, creativity, and being present.



Nature offers us stress reduction and emotional resilience. Studies have shown how being in nature reduces cortisol levels, anxiety, and depression. All of these outcomes help to enhance our emotional stability and resilience. We find a sense of peace and calm when we are out in nature. Just being in nature, which is as simple as going for a walk or making a short drive to the water, helps to quiet the mind and settle the overstimulation we live with.

Time seems to slow down when we are outside, and we can naturally get tuned in to what is happening at the moment. The present moment is where we want to be. While that is taking place, our breathing tends to slow down, and we breathe more deeply. Have you noticed how we start taking shallow breaths when we are stressed or scared? When we begin to breathe deeper and more slowly, our blood pressure lowers, and we begin to find a balance of mind and body.

The Documentary *The Earthing Movie: The Remarkable Science of Grounding* shares the results of getting our bare feet back on the earth. We literally become “grounded” and are connected to the earth. When this happens, electrical currents that we hold in our bodies are released. That can be very healing. It has a remarkable outcome when we make contact with the earth without rubber-soled shoes on our feet. We need to stand on the ground with bare feet.

Have you ever noticed how much better you feel after it rains? There's something about the fresh, earthy smell in the air. We get a renewed sense of energy. It turns out it's not just our imagination. The rain fills the air with negative ions, which are tiny, charged molecules that can have powerful effects on your mood and mental well-being. The heavier the downpour, the higher the concentration of negative ions. Let the rain wash over you next time there's a thunderstorm rolling by, then breathe in deeply. Get outside and soak it in, literally. You'll feel refreshed, rejuvenated, and blissfully content in no time. You

can go to the ocean or a waterfall and have the same thing happen. The crashing waves and tumbling water release negative ions in droves.

When water molecules collide during these events, the energy breaks apart oxygen and nitrogen molecules in the air, creating these negative ions. Once they reach our bloodstream, they are believed to produce biochemical reactions that increase levels of the mood chemical serotonin.

If you're thinking I'm not going out in that kind of weather, I remember reading an article in the Oregonian about a Norwegian word that describes a popular way of life in Scandinavia. **Friluftsliv** (free loots liv) is the Norwegian word for this philosophy. A direct translation to English would be 'fresh-air life.' The Nordic philosophy encourages everyone to go out and enjoy nature. The article said that there are boots and clothing designed for different weather conditions, and we should have those clothes on hand so we can go outside every day of the year. The author shared, "I think that one of the reasons why Norway is the happiest country in the world is because we take time to embrace the great outdoors in our daily life."

Last summer, we held a "Forest Bathing" event. Inspired by Japanese research, Forest Bathing was started to find some balance in the amount of time workers spent indoors. Blood and saliva samples were taken before the outdoor experience to record the difference made by being outside with a focus on nature. The results were remarkable.

Forest bathing in the U.S. skips taking samples before the outdoor experience. It does, however, offer a wonderful way to be outside and refocus by paying attention to things we usually don't even notice. It also brings a new level of awareness of our environment and a connection to nature.

We can find ourselves experiencing moments of awe and wonder as we experience the reaction that being in nature can evoke. Connecting to nature is one way of connecting to our spirituality. Nature can reflect back to us what is going on inside of

us and show us how everything is connected. We are one with Nature since we are one with everything, and everything is spiritually connected.

Time spent in nature can help us refocus on what's truly important, bringing clarity and purpose to our lives. The walk I took in nature yesterday did help me refocus and find my center again. It allowed me to let go of the intensity I was feeling. It reminded me that I don't need to get too hung up on anything.

Nature offers a Connection to the Sacred. Many people feel a profound connection to the divine when in nature. Spiritual practices like meditation, prayer, or gratitude in natural settings can give us a strong sense of connection and belonging.

Recently, I drove up Sequim Bay Road to see the herd of elk out in the field. It is exhilarating to see them. Some have quite the antlers, while others are still young and playful. What a joy it is for me to see them. It just isn't something that everyone gets to experience.

Ernest Holmes wrote in his book, *The Science of Mind* (p. 36-7), "Nature seems to await our comprehension of her and, since she is governed by immutable laws - the ignorance of humanity must be a result of our ignorance of the true nature of Reality" (p. 33).

When we are in nature, we get to use our senses. It becomes experiential learning. It's such a great way to learn. Schools in Finland use experiential learning with children. Nature teaches us patience and acceptance while we wait for the changing seasons. There's a rhythm that keeps its own time. We can plant a seed, but we can't make it sprout any faster than the pace that nature does it. We just have to have patience.

The Gift of Nature as a Pathway to Inner Peace has the power to restore our hearts and spirits. It brings a sense of well-being, and we can enjoy the experience of going out to play.

Meditation - The Four Pebbles

This meditation is from Thich Nhat Hanh. In your pouch, you have four pebbles. I invite you to participate with me as you set your pebbles on your lap. Now, pick up one pebble and hold it in the palm of your hand. Look at it with fresh eyes. The pebble represents a flower. Put your other hand over the pebble and hold it. Breathing in, say to yourself, I see myself as a flower. Breathing out, I feel fresh. Flower - Fresh.

Silently remember the words, Flower - Fresh, as you breath in and out three times. You are like a flower. Each of us is like a flower. We are open to new things every day. We grow and change. Flower - Fresh.

Now set down the pebble you are holding and pick up the next pebble. This pebble represents a mountain. Put it in the palm of your hand and place the other hand over it. Breathing in, say to yourself, I see myself as a mountain. Breathing out I feel solid. Mountain - Solid. Remember that as you breath in, Mountain. As you breath out, Solid. You have a mountain inside of you. You are capable of being solid and stable. You are reliable. Mountain - Solid.

Now, set down the pebble you are holding and pick up the next one. This pebble represents still water. Hold the pebble in your hand and place your other hand over it. Breathing in, say to yourself, I see myself as Still Water, breathing out, I Reflect things as they truly are. Breathing in, Water, breathing out, Calm. Calm water is deep inside you. You are calm, and clear, and peaceful. Water - Calm.

Place this pebble down and pick up the fourth pebble. Look at it and smile. This pebble represents space. Put it in the palm of your hand and place your other hand over the top of it. Breathing in, say to yourself, I see myself as Space. Breathing out I feel Free. Space - Free.

Remember these words, silently saying to yourself, as you breathe in and out three times. Space is within you. We can travel in our minds as if we're going to the moon, or like a kite in the air. We are free from our cares. We also give each other freedom. We touch the space we feel inside us, we are free. Space - Free.

Now set down the pebble. Look at all four pebbles. In this quiet moment, hold these symbols of The Gifts of Nature in your thoughts.

Flower - Fresh. Mountain - Solid. Water - Calm. Space - Free.

I hope you will seek out the gifts of nature often. I know we will be better for the experience and the closeness to Good that it brings.

And so it is.

